



## Sexual Politics and "Last Tango in Paris"

Joan Mellen

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roots which are those of the peasant world. I want to carry the camera into the cornfields, into the furrows of earth during irrigation, into the ground itself; and in a less physical sense bring them to rediscover certain popular values which we, for imperialistic reasons, have completely throttled. It's for those who today are 25 or younger—that means for all those who know this kind of world only from literature (and that, too, is a privilege, after all), for all those of the great mass who know nothing at all about these values, who are perfectly ignorant of their own roots, which must still be there

somewhere—I just don't believe that a few decades can cancel out generations of genetic memory; in our nucleic acid there must be a memory of the values of the land. At least a sediment! Nobody has ever posed this problem.

*Do you feel more clarity now, at least in being able to provide some guidance to this generation you are describing?*

No, no. I have no clear lessons to impart. Personally, I do not see clearly, neither the problems nor the perspective. But I feel that within the party one is now given space to develop, perhaps, a clearer view.

JOAN MELLEN

## Sexual Politics and *Last Tango in Paris*

*Last Tango In Paris* seems as if it is about sex, an inquiry into whether violent, "real" sex (the kind that makes Maria Schneider's hair curl by the middle of the film) is possible in a world of false values. The real significance of the film has been obscured and contained by the irrelevant furor over its purportedly explicit sex. What is particularly striking about the film, once we get over the sight of Marlon Brando performing anal sex, albeit with his clothes on, is that it is, in disguise, the most political of Bertolucci's films so far—his most ambitious attempt to integrate Marx and Freud. The means this time are not those of the superficiality of external political behavior, as in *The Conformist*, but a startling visualization of the conflict between sexual freedom (conceived in *Last Tango* as license) and the psychological repression of which we are all victims.

The premise from which *Last Tango* begins, and which none of the American critics have



perceived to date, is an indictment of the bourgeois family which dominates culture and society, suppresses feeling and "civilizes" the "savage" in us all by repressing bodily needs. Unexperienced and unacknowledged, these feelings emerge in a distorted form, either through the political savagery of the heroine's father (a colonel who died in Algiers) or in sexual relationships. With the heroine Jeanne (Maria Schneider) and her fiancé Tom (Jean-Pierre Léaud) deep feeling is shunned and feared. The wild sexual frenzy of Jeanne and Paul (Marlon Brando) is achieved through complete seclusion from society. Only then can they risk real and unbridled emotion. The impossible and hopelessly romantic goal of the figure portrayed by Marlon Brando is to unleash feeling outside of the framework of relations fixed by the external world, using a girl with whom all personal and past history will be denied and disallowed.

Bertolucci has said that "in our society even adultery becomes a bourgeois institution."<sup>\*</sup> Bourgeois man, he perceives, represses his primal feelings, but winds up acting them out even as he imputes them to his victims—the poor whom the colonel's dog, Mustapha, would immediately recognize and attack when they entered his gates. The individual psyche and the social behavior of the bourgeois invariably converge and synthesize. During the most abusive sex act in the film, a rape involving anal intercourse, Paul forces Jeanne to intone a ritual of denunciation of "the holy family" and the "Church" which makes "civilized people of savages," renouncing "all that children are taught until their wills are broken."

Although *Last Tango* is set in no particular historical epoch, the film is preoccupied with the

meaning of history during the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie. It denies our ability to move beyond the logic of what we have been or where we have come from. If it is not *about* politics, it is more political than either *The Spider's Stratagem* or *The Conformist* because it explores how people are afflicted by the dominant values of the time, seeking in sexual release a means of escape both from the social past and from the personal history of character. Brando-Paul experiences feeling as inseparable from rage and violence because this association occurs when deep needs are repressed from earliest years. And he can risk their expression solely in an insular, artificial environment isolated from bourgeois reality because the violence outside is not merely the concomitant of surfacing need, but brutalization and murder, as the colonel's boots and gun intimate. Jeanne submits, fascinated by the power of Paul's rage—but when, late in the film, it bursts inevitably into the outside world, it is thereby transmuted and assimilated to a sordid reality as oppressive as it is dreary.

The predominant camera movement deployed by Bertolucci is the tilt, usually beginning high up and moving down to earth, inexorably, fatally. Through its frequency, it runs by the end of the film in dialectical counterpoint to the plot, working in satire of Paul's attempt to escape from time and space in his idyll with Jeanne. In despair, experiencing a trauma of isolation and abandonment after his wife Rose's unexplained suicide, Paul pursues a 20-year-old, callow, waif-like half-child, Jeanne. He corners her in a run-down, rat-infested Paris apartment, virtually rapes her and then sets up a liaison.

The tilt expresses the presence of Bertolucci himself, warning Paul of the downward motion by which life returns us to what we have always been. Paul's inability to save his wife from suicide, and his absolute failure to know her, will be repeated in his failure to give himself without brutality and machismo to Jeanne (as well as in Jeanne's failure to accept him without this machismo). Only after his wife's death does Paul learn that her hotel had been a way-station

<sup>\*</sup>Many interviews have recently been published with Bertolucci, Brando, and Schneider. Quotations in this article are drawn from: *New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1973; *Newsweek*, Feb. 12, 1973; *The Village Voice*, Feb. 8, 1973; and from personal conversations with Bertolucci in Rome, May 1972. Pauline Kael's influential early review of the film was in *The New Yorker*, Oct. 28, 1972; Judith Crist's review was in *New York*, Feb. 5, 1973.

for street whores. She in her "purity" shared the aura of the aging prostitute whom she befriended. The tilt foreshadows Paul's return to the present by means of the past, as at the end of the film he offers Jeanne the gift of his real name, age, and history.

But at the beginning of the film, in trauma over the suicide he had been unable or unwilling to prevent, Paul rejects even the rudiments of furniture for his retreat with Jeanne. They suggest the appointments of his past and the suicide of Rose from which he is in flight. Paul demands that he and Jeanne tell each other nothing of their real lives, not even their names or the names of anyone they know.

Paul's method of escape from the pain and despair of unrequitable need (as revealed in the *cinéma vérité* account of his childhood) is, as Bertolucci has called it, "the present of fucking." The structure of the film, like the camera's return to the tilt, passes judgment and turns upon each of the character's futile attempts to transcend the conditioned responses of human connection. Jeanne, in a moment of gaiety, suggests to Paul that they try "to 'come' without touching." They sit, naked, staring at each other, their eyes tightly shut. The moment is early in the film, in the first flush of delight in discovering the joy of sexual play, through which they made contact with *themselves*, beyond the bonds conscious and social life have placed around them. It is also the beginning of the end of their idyll, as they make a failed attempt to deflect sexuality ever so slightly away from the abrupt penetration Paul demands as the sole mode of passionate relation.

Bertolucci works within Freudian conviction, centering the organization of Jeanne's psyche in the oedipal relation to her father. Nonetheless, Bertolucci has adapted Freudian perception to his own sociology, invoking Freud's dynamics of character more in spirit than in form. His people therefore behave as they do not because they are determined by Freud's model for all of human nature, but because they have been socialized by the repressive bourgeois family.

This is why in a film in which the hero hopes

to carry out his relationship in absolute seclusion from the world, members of Paul's, Jeanne's, and even Rose's family appear unexpectedly in the *mise-en-scène*. Paul recollects his mother and father, Jeanne's mother recalls the colonel whose boots, gun (with which Paul will be murdered) and hat remain physically present and continue to arouse her. Rose's superstitious, meddling mother haunts Paul physically, presenting the source of Rose's devastation. They are there to establish that neither we nor Paul nor Jeanne have been inherently predetermined to behave as we do. The coercion of family, church, and state have been internalized—the very institutions Paul forces Jeanne to repudiate during acts of sexual brutality.

Because he handles his political radicalism so unobtrusively in *Last Tango*, critics have been misled into seeing crude Freudian mechanics in the characterizations—the result, perhaps, of their knowledge that Bertolucci began psychoanalytic therapy during production of *The Spider's Stratagem*. The Freudian motif infuses the earlier works as well. Athos Magnani and his son in *Spider's Stratagem* are played by the same man; the betrayal of resistance against Mussolini is conjoined to oedipal strife. In *The Conformist*, Clerici is shown in sexual play with his mother and in abuse of his psychotic father. Out of the oedipal drama flows a feared homosexuality, the root cause of Clerici's embrace of fascism. And Paul and Jeanne in *Last Tango* are also misshaped by the conjunction of instinctual need and the social repression of that need. Yet although he has denied particular interest in Wilhelm Reich, like Reich, Bertolucci pursues a concrete mediation between Freud and Marx, and there is little of the tenuousness of Freudian absolutism in *Last Tango In Paris*.

With *Last Tango* Bertolucci abandons an excess of historical detail, achieving with color alone most of the work of set design. This is because Paul searches for a pure moment in which past conditioning and external demand are cast off, however briefly. The emotional results, the process of failure, and the insidious intrusion of both the past and the society Paul

would defy, grant the film its beauty and a daring which is unnerving.

Paul and Jeanne at fleeting moments believe they can exist outside of their own personal histories and past, but the very necessity to leave their hideaway and re-enter the time, space, and reality of the outer world foredooms them. Even their escape is marred by a constant awareness that they cannot live in the world and preserve what they have achieved only in flashes and instants. Bertolucci sees the tragedy and capitulation to the world as inexorable in this age, what Marx called the "pre-history of man"—a capitalist era incapable of humane relations. The disjunction between "savage" or intense feeling and civilization makes inevitably romantic the attempt of isolated individuals to remake themselves, while the world whose shape they would shed, remains. In fact, it is only Paul who is conscious of what is being attempted and who sees that it can work in the hideaway alone. Only when Paul gives in to his need to live in the world, and seeks to live with Jeanne on bourgeois terms, does she realize that it is over and can't work, indeed that it all becomes an enslavement.

A weakness of the film is that Jeanne is too young and unseasoned, too integrated within the relations of the pop present to understand Paul or his purpose. When he abandons his demonic quest and approaches her outside, he becomes a gum-chewing man of limited intelligence and achievement, as pathetic as the tango palace whose last dance he performs not only in derision, but in self-parody. When they speak to each other outside, all is sordid and unappealing: the flop-house hotel Paul inherited from Rose, the "cowshit" of the country where he would "take" Jeanne to live and his inability to have children because of "a prostate like an Idaho potato," caused by "a 'nail' I picked up in Cuba." Gone is the excitement of this abuse of her in the apartment, the lingering memory of the butter with which he stuffed her anus in a moment of sexual frenzy—to which she had submitted masochistically as a guilty upholder of the norms of her social class.

Jeanne is allowed to experience only the abuses of the sexual and we may ask why Bertolucci feels the tormented struggle should be that of the male alone. It is true that Jeanne herself, through her father and family, epitomizes the bourgeois, and she at the end is Paul's literal destroyer. But Paul had been unable to love his wife who killed herself in emptiness. He is no more valuable a human being, and is, in fact, far less capable of expressing love. Each time Jeanne shows him real feeling, he finds a new method of humiliating her sexually and bending her to his will; and it is he and not she who insists at the end upon the return to the bourgeois. It is, therefore, legitimate to challenge Bertolucci's conception of male and female roles.

Jeanne is passive, masochistic, and arousable only by brutality. She is singularly unmoved by the good-natured egotism of her fiancé, the *cinéma vérité* movie-maker played by Léaud. He is a callow, narrow-hipped unisex counterpart to Schneider herself. Bertolucci has found it necessary to tell interviewers that he is "absolutely for women's liberation. I like women better than men." It was in this context that he also has said that Jeanne is "not the woman of the future or the liberated woman, but the woman of the present," who can tell a man she would copulate with a pig for him and submit, if unwillingly, to anal sex.

It is precisely when Jeanne tells Paul he is the man she loves, the one who can save her from loneliness, that he humiliates her most completely. He forces her to stick two fingers up his ass while he indulges in reviling her as the embodiment of the society on which he would revenge himself: "I'm gonna get a pig and have it fuck you and vomit in your face and you have to swallow the vomit and then go behind it and smell the guts of the pig." But because Jeanne is made the bourgeoisie and Paul the social rebel, she is violated by a rebel-hero *as* a bourgeoisie and not as a victim of a bourgeois. Bertolucci thus sustains the culture's degradation of women in his film. Jeanne is never a participant in Paul's rebellion, but a foil and the vehicle of the culture and society, even when, ambiguously, she be-

comes the agency of his death.

Bertolucci constantly lights up Brando's face in gold (the set designer has called it "uterine"), and the quest for the absolute erotic present in sex is clearly his and Bertolucci's, with Jeanne playing the part of necessary tool. Brando, notoriously, posted his lines all over the set and even asked Bertolucci if he "could write lines on Maria's rear end"—no better example of her role as instrumentality. Schneider herself has insisted there was no real correspondence between herself and the passive Jeanne: "I have never been submissive like her. I am very free sexually, and it was still difficult to do Jeanne." And of his collaboration with Brando, who improvised continuously on the set, Bertolucci has said, "It was like a love affair," nowhere better minimizing Jeanne's significance as a human being to the project, let alone her equality as a presence in the film.

Judith Crist has thus expressed the chagrin of many in her revulsion for the image of woman conveyed in this film: "The film is all machismo filled with such detestation of and contempt for women that its universality is limited." Only Pauline Kael, whose rave review reads at a far lower level of consciousness than the film itself, seems to be at home with the film's treatment of Jeanne. But this may be because, applauding "hypnotic excitement . . . primitive force [and] thrusting, jabbing eroticism," she herself seems to have been seduced by the scenes in which Paul attempts to mold Jeanne like clay and bend her body to his will. Responding only to the surface of the film imposed largely by the star, Brando, Kael feels it necessary to assert that the girl Jeanne gets only what she deserves and, in any event, through her very callowness, triumphs over her aggressor: "It is the soft ones who defeat men and walk away, consciencelessly."

And indeed the imagery of the film is governed by the grand, machismo beauty of Paul and the inferiority of Jeanne. Even at the end, when Paul is no longer the bestial rebel, an inverted father come alive, Bertolucci's distaste for Jeanne emerges. She may be sexually vibrant

and alluring, but she is without depth, real character, or the capacity to rise to the role of heroine or rebel. Her entire body, complete with pubic hair, is continuously revealed to us because it is irrelevant to the dynamic of the film—as Bertolucci has admitted in his explanation of why he cut the shot he filmed of Brando's genitals. "I cut it out simply for structural reasons, to shorten the film," Bertolucci dissembled. Too honest, however, to allow himself this pretense, especially for a film so replete with the presence of the director, Bertolucci added, "It is also possible that I had so identified myself with Brando that I cut it out of shame for myself. To show him naked would have been like showing myself naked." Bertolucci does not value Jeanne or feel her worthy of such concern because she is chosen to carry the persona and the quality of the bourgeois world itself, the worm in the wood of Paul's retreat. Jeanne is not the adult carrying the themes of the film, as she might have been had the part been played by a Simone Signoret to a Paul performed by a charming if unknown boy actor. The male is the real character and his sexual abuse of Jeanne expresses the moment of Bertolucci's consciousness. As Maria Schneider herself has said, she and Brando were "acting out Bernardo's sex problems . . . Bernardo was getting free of his sex problems. In effect we were trying to transfer them to the film."

Bertolucci's handling of the male and female thus brings us back to his dependence upon Freud, whom he has called "very important in my biological-physical life." As sexual violator, Paul was no threat to Jeanne's love for her father because only symbolically had he become the agent of the paternal, denouncing the father's world and values. But as a real man who would occupy the place reserved for her father, he cannot compare. He is dissolute, repellent, and lacks the actual power and authority in the world which her father fully and comfortably possessed. Jeanne shoots Paul with her father's gun, an obvious symbol of the penis, which Paul had playfully called her "happenis." (The shooting takes place with Paul curled up in a fetal posi-



tion: Bertolucci diminishes the film at the moments when he unnecessarily reduces it to formula.)

But Bertolucci largely succeeds in integrating his Freudian view of personality into the felt life of the film. One of its richest moments restores the inexorable realities of the present to Paul's fleeing psyche. It comes from Brando himself, in a monologue which both brings us close to the man and intimates why the world is unavoidably with him, and will claim him despite his mythic attempt to defy and transcend it alone. For Bertolucci as for Freud, childhood is always with us. During the shooting, the film dissolved into *cinéma vérité*. Brando the actor becomes Brando the screenwriter, his remembrance of his own past deployed as an emblem of the roots of Paul's character.

Brando recalls his father as "a drunk, tough . . . super-masculine," his mother as "very poetic—and also a drunk." He recounts how she was arrested nude and how he had to milk the cows every morning and evening. One evening when he was to take a girl to a basketball game, his father tyrannically demanded he first

milk the cow. With cowshit on his shoes, Paul collected the girl and smelled in the car all the way to the game.

The "cowshit" for Paul, Brando, and Bertolucci represents all from which it is impossible to escape, the damage done us, the humiliation which confuses need and resentment, the pain of human connection and the enclosing history of one's existence. This dynamic animates a sexual politics which circumscribes Paul despite his desperate attempt to transcend himself. Bertolucci expressed it schematically: Paul begins as a man in battle to surmount but "goes back to adolescence and through a period of anal sadism," and is reduced in the final shot to a dead fetus. We progress from hopeful beginnings to failed but identical ends.

In defiance of Paul, who demanded that all history and identity should be ignored, Jeanne tells him when he lapses into describing his past, "You've been had. I don't want to know anything about your past, baby." Quoting him, Bertolucci allows her, playfully, to undermine the whole structure of his futile existential quest to live absolutely in the present. The scene was

shot in one take, itself an expression of the resilience of the past in its drive to overtake us. Bertolucci brilliantly shows the hopelessness of instant salvation or existential "freedom" outside of history or social change.

Jeanne also seeks to deny the past, but in her case, as a model bourgeoisie, by lying about its meaning and its hold upon her. Paul is honest about the way it was. Jeanne insists that childhood was "beautiful." And Paul with feeling rejoins, "Is it beautiful to be made into a tattle-tale . . . or to sell yourself for a piece of candy?" Jeanne, who was trained by family and class to live on the surface, thinks she is free of her past—even as does Maria Schneider, who was well chosen by Bertolucci for his conception of Jeanne. Schneider talks identically about herself as "free": "He's [Brando] not so free as I am. I'm more beautiful than he is." As a child Jeanne drew pictures of towers: a prisoner of the sexual and emotional world of the nuclear family, bound by envy and need for the penis denied her by nature and celebrated by her culture. Through Jeanne, if not through Paul, the shadow of Freud continuously dominates Bertolucci's image of female identity.

United Artists must have been delighted to print Pauline Kael's review in full in the advertisements for *Last Tango* because it focusses on the sex. In Kael's by now long familiar anti-intellectualism, her article ignores the true theme of the film, the whirling of the past which slowly advances, deadly and implacable, on both characters. What is interesting about *Last Tango* is not its simulation of forbidden sex (sodomy and masturbation), but its tracing of the boundaries of free choice in controlling one's relationships and forging one's separate identity. *Last Tango* is about the elusiveness of our hold on the present, which remains the only means by which we can live with the past. Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bertolucci's mentor with whom he worked on his first film, *Accatone*, has called *Last Tango* "a betrayal of culture," asking, "what's new about sadism?" But what is original about *Tango* cannot be its eroticism, which must bow in ex-

plicitness to pornos like *Deep Throat*. It is, rather, the use of sex as a catalyst to explore our mythological capacity to forever begin anew and live life in defiance of what we have been.

Always with Bertolucci at his best, style renews substance. The opening shot of the film is a dolly on a diagonal down to an agonized Brando crying out in a cathartic scream, "Fucking God!" while a Metro train on a viaduct goes by over his head. The walkway on which we first see both characters comes to represent the precarious bridge over which people travel in danger of falling into the abyss of their feelings. Jeanne enters the shot dressed outlandishly, swinging along with a carelessness that accentuates the tears of Paul whose anguish goes unanswered and unheard. The apartment at which they come together is on the Rue Jules Verne. Like the submarine of Captain Nemo, it will be an enclosed cocoon shut away from the harsh world, in which the soiled relations of the earth, the past, cannot enter. Like a womb, it is a place where Paul and Jeanne can express their rages and needs as infants.

Several surreal notes in the opening sequence provide cinematic equivalents for the emotions of Paul. A woman brushes false teeth in the toilet as Jeanne enters to make a phone call. In a flood of yellow light Paul passes her in the café. (The use of yellow in this film recalls Eisenstein's brilliant essay on "Color and Meaning" in *The Film Sense*.) The mad laughter of the black concierge creates a mood of the demonic, expressing Bertolucci's sense that inside, Paul and Jeanne are in the clutches of their obsessions and fantasies. The concierge grabs Jeanne's hand and won't relinquish it, like our compulsions which we are destined to act out.

Paul's entrance into the apartment itself is mysterious. He materializes out of nowhere, hunched in a corner like a demon or a ghost, like an unconscious urge which unexpectedly possesses us, playing itself out within its own closed logic. Brando sits as if rolled into a ball, clutching himself to provide the comfort he has been unable to obtain in the world.

Jeanne is both repelled and fascinated by the



nihilism of the situation. The mirror in the apartment is cracked, another indication that the events which will take place here will be only a distorted reflection of the "real." Jeanne urinates with the bathroom door open; she is not wearing any pants. The apartment on the Rue Jules Verne is a place where inhibition must vanish, in which the *raison d'être* of their being together is to peel off what is external to their deepest selves. When Paul takes Jeanne for the first time, her response is almost immediate, wrapping her legs around him as he bends over her. The act has been prepared for by all these images suggesting a stripping away of facade, a return to the primal.

Leaving Paul, Jeanne hurries along a train platform to meet Léaud. The mad rush of the train on the Rue Jules Verne symbolized the emotion of Paul. It conveys the compulsion of Jeanne's attraction to him and his need. Its counterpart is the tame, static train from which Léaud exits. He walks through life filming his experiences rather than living them, as Jorge Luis Borges has called the tango a way of walking through life. Tom-Léaud is making a film about his relationship with Jeanne called "Portrait of a Girl," and she calls him the coward he is, hiding from life behind the parasitic role of the artist.

In the character played by Léaud, Bertolucci also seems to be satirizing Jean-Luc Godard and the bourgeois film-maker pretending to be a revolutionary. Léaud plans with Jeanne to name their children "Fidel" and "Rosa," recalling Godard's *Vladimir and Rosa*; he wishes to repeat the cycle of the destructive bourgeois family which drives its children to suicide. Léaud rushes around with his hand-held camera, is humorless and uses his pretty girlfriend in his movie, as Godard used his wives, Anna Karina and Anna Wiazemski. But even without these thinly veiled allusions he is ludicrous.

In an impressionistic series of intercuts Bertolucci draws us into the world of Paul which runs parallel to his affair with Jeanne. The first is the most shocking, that of the scene of his wife's suicide in which blood has been sprayed every-

where—on the walls, the door of the bathroom, and the shower curtain; the bathtub has thick red bloodstains, suggestive of violently primal acts, birth, ritual, violence, death. The girl who is cleaning has told the police. "One day he debarks in Tahiti," an explicit reference to Brando himself as a person incapable of giving enough love, escaping from himself into the exotic, the strange and the forbidden.

Paralleling Paul's disintegration in the decaying hotel where the final arrangements for the funeral proceed, are the scenes at the Rue Jules Verne in which he seeks to dominate Jeanne. He is in flight from the truth about his relationship with Rose, who took one of the hotel boarders as her lover. In one brilliant surreal scene, Brando and the lover, sitting in the identical red plaid bathrobes given them by Rose, drink the bourbon she had given her lover in emulation of her wished-for relationship with Paul. Impotently, trying to understand why Rose has killed herself, Paul tells the man, "I can't understand what she saw in you"; the irony is that in her entrapment what she saw in the man was Paul. She tried to make of her lover a replica of the Paul who could not give her the love she sought.

The hotel, lit with a sinister yellow, is no less enclosed than the apartment. Rose, like Jeanne, was condemned to the paltriest of emotional choices. In the apartment Bertolucci uses very shallow depth of field, paralleling Paul's struggle to keep everything in the one-dimensional present. He frequently cuts during a tilt from Paul and Jeanne to Paul in the hotel, indicating the inescapable motion from the willed and the fantastic to the real. The camera itself tells us of the futility of Paul's quest to escape to the present from what he has been.

With Paul, Jeanne becomes a child, as they gurgle and groan together. As Brando says, in fatigue over his own life matching Paul's, "Oh, God, I've been called by a million names all my life." The childish sounds the two make in lieu of names are cut into the barnyard of ducks recorded by Léaud's soundman. The priggish Léaud is always at one remove from feeling. He

records the duck's quack instead of reaching for the sound from within himself.

He believes that to be adult one must be "serious, logical, cinctuspect, and hairy," facing all problems. He is a child, despite his possession of pubic hair, and not an adult like Paul, who knows that all feeling is childlike, that only a child is embarrassed by childishness. The filmmaker is both child and parasite, urging Jeanne to recall her past and her father so that he can "use" it and so deny its meaning. With Léaud, Jeanne can never communicate. "His eyes are closed," Léaud murmurs. "He played the piano very well," is her reply in non-sequitur.

Thus, however much distance Bertolucci creates between himself and Paul, the impulse in the film is constantly to diminish it. Léaud provides the film with a nonauthentic choice for Jeanne. The boy her own age, who wants to know everything about her past and is willing to marry her, is also superficial, unfeeling, and incapable of reaching her real self. The rough, dominating Paul-Brando who rages and is sadistic is the "real man," the "good stick man" despite his ruined prostate. The film shows no love-making between Jeanne and Léaud, suggesting that if Paul is forever returning to the fetal, Léaud has not even come as far as puberty. Still a boy, he can only talk about "being," and foolishly believe he can "change everything," encouraging Jeanne to "change chance to fate." Hiding behind his camera he has not yet the courage to make himself vulnerable, as Paul can.

Bertolucci ultimately shares with Sam Peckinpah, despite their political differences, the idea that the successful relationship between a man and a woman occurs when the woman is passive and the man as furiously domineering as a stud bull. However inadequate Paul is made to seem outside the apartment, the idyll inside forms a "set piece," a pure cinematic moment of authenticity beside which every other experience recorded in the film is derivative and as inauthentic as the life preserver stamped "L'Atalante," pace Jean Vigo, thrown into the Seine by Léaud. Paul lives *L'Atalante*. The apartment is his barge. Léaud is an outsider on life, his nose

pressed up to the glass of being.

Even in the apartment, however, pure experience cannot be sustained, although its impermanence is suggested as a necessary hazard of existence rather than as a result of the neurosis or inadequacy of Paul. Jeanne finds that his "solitude weights on her" because "it isn't indulgent or generous." He talks about his past, yet he won't let her talk about hers. In defiance she lies down on the mattress and masturbates. He sits on the floor and cries in desperation, an effective cut from his life with Jeanne to that with Rose, indicating through the editing that the two relationships are essentially similar, and ultimately evoke similar emotions.

Like Rose, Jeanne discovers that at a deep level, he hates women: "Either they pretend to know who I am or they pretend that I don't know who they are." Jeanne is as unhappy with him as she is with Léaud, whom she attacks in terms that apply equally if not more to her relationship with Paul: "You take advantage of me. You make me do whatever you want. The film is over. I'm tired of having my mind raped." Bertolucci seems to anticipate the reaction to his portrayal of Jeanne, although he does not answer it.

The film thus progresses to a reductionism in which all relationships coalesce into one, even that between Jeanne and director Bertolucci, for whom Léaud in part stands as a satirized emblem. In response to Jeanne's tirade, all Léaud can do is make gestures with his hands across a Metro platform, framing a shot of her angry face. Her anger becomes that of Rose who tried to rip the wallpaper off the wall of her lover's apartment with her fingernails because she wanted the walls white, identical to those of her room with Paul. Rose was as powerless to control her life as Jeanne is to control hers.

The frequent tilts also convey the motion of one life merging into another. It is a closed notion of human existence, at moments determined in the most limited sense. As the central premise behind all the action it imposes the most diminishing element on Bertolucci's film. It underlines the reductionism of his characteriza-

tions, which increases as the film goes on. The cries of Jeanne after anal intercourse merge with the shrill sound of the train passing once again overhead, as she lies amidst the debris on the floor: bread, butter, and knife. It is like the humor and panache with which Brando swings the dead rat, a symbol of the decay of their relationship, in Jeanne's face. Despite the play, it is still a dead rat.

At the same time the film nowhere denies Paul's assertion that a love where you never have to be lonely does not exist; we are all "alone, all alone." We never learn the truth about each other, as Paul says to the flower-bedecked corpse of Rose before which he breaks down. Each wanted the other to take care of him/her. He calls their marriage a "foxhole" because they hid their real needs from each other. Like Léaud and Jeanne and, as Bertolucci implies, like all people in our age, they could not communicate. Paul's last gesture to Rose, wiping the obscene cosmetics from her face, is even interrupted by the knocking at the hotel door of a whore with her prey, to whom "the owner (Rose) has always been helpful." And Paul becomes her pimp, as Rose had been. For Bertolucci we are all "pimping," buying love when we cannot evoke it. With Paul in pursuit of the whore's client, Bertolucci cuts to the café sign: "La Bohème," satirizing the sentimental love story which still provides the romantic ideal for our society. "Love," says Bertolucci, is beating up a client for an ugly old whore, even as our love is tawdry, unreal, and self-seeking.

The ending confirms the characters in their destinies; Paul is as worn-out as the chewing gum he takes out of his mouth before he dies and deposits under the terrace railing of Jeanne's bourgeois apartment. He is as out of date as the tango dancers with their artificial heads locked in a distorted position, emphasizing again that he is of another era and that there is no "beginning again."

The mistress of ceremonies calls for "all best wishes for the last tango" and a long sweeping tilt takes us down beneath the tango couples to Paul and Jeanne whose destiny together is played

out by the dance. When the MC interrupts their love-making, ("It's a contest, where does love fit in?") Paul, again in absurd futility, can only take his pants down to the woman, a parody of the exciting, violent passion he and Jeanne knew before. He becomes a real child rather than an adult accepting a child's needs. And Paul, like Léaud, has assumed an inauthentic facade, as we all do so often, despite ourselves. When he does an imitation of James Cagney, Jeanne in desperation grabs his penis, and the camera tracks past the empty tables in disappointment as she makes him come for the last time, his "last tango."

The final shot of the film belongs to the murdereress Jeanne, in shallow focus so that the body of Paul on the terrace beyond is barely defined; in terror, she plans her story for the police: "I don't know his name, I don't know who he is, he tried to rape me, he's a madman, I don't know his name." He had, in fact, become a man she did not know, the husband of Rose, a 45-year-old adventurer. In his need Paul, all men, become devourers. Rose escaped him by killing herself; Jeanne escapes by killing *him*. Fearing the perversity and destruction of human relationships, as he had known them, Paul concealed his need of her as long as he could. As soon as she recognized that he was no longer the strong father figure, but a real man beset by the identity of a flawed, inadequate human being, like all of us, she no longer wanted him. Jeanne could be won only by brutality, by savagery.

But there is also a brilliant combination of the unconscious and the political at the end. In donning the colonel's hat in jest, Brando becomes a bourgeois like him, one of those who "civilize the savage" rather than allow primitive unconscious impulses to surface and express themselves. As a bourgeois in the apartment of Jeanne's bourgeois family, he becomes repressive, both politically (through the dialogue) and psychologically. "I ran through Africa, Asia, and Indonesia and now I found you," he tells Jeanne. He is no better than Rose's religious mother whom he accused of teaching the dead woman to repress her feelings and of being an

indirect cause of her death. It is after he symbolically becomes the bourgeois colonel that Jeanne shoots him in revolutionary rebellion—although throughout the film she has been Bertolucci's vehicle for the bourgeois. At the very end the two exchange roles, revealing the duality in human nature which forces us to become the very thing we despise. (That we are what we claim to hate, that we are always ambivalent, was equally the theme of Bertolucci's *Partner*, based upon the idea of the double.)

*Last Tango*, visually complex, its imagery constantly revealing character and sensibility, both of people and of the age in which they live, offers too narrow a conception of what human beings can give to each other to be a great film. And Bertolucci is not consistently distant enough

from his subject to offer us the exquisite ironies with which Buñuel invests *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, which Bertolucci encouraged the viewers of his film at the New York Film Festival to go out and see.

Yet as a paean to the damage inflicted on us all by bourgeois values, and on the inability of even pure sex to rescue us from bondage to the family and its lifelong hold on our sensibilities, *Last Tango* is a brilliant film. Where it lacks distance, it offers passion. Where it chronicles only failure, and where Jeanne and Paul, but especially Jeanne, seem too diminished to represent us, the attempt they make to come together (with or without touching) carries gaiety, courage, and a large conception, if not its complete realization.

BOLESŁAW MICHAŁEK

## The Cinema of Krzysztof Zanussi

Krzysztof Zanussi does not look like a film director: he is tall, rather thin, wears glasses, and although he appears to be a rather young scholar, he is very sure of himself. And indeed, he is scholarly. For four years he studied physics at the University of Warsaw and planned to become a solid-state physicist, but then transferred to Kraków where he directed his interests to philosophy: specifically theory of values, morality, psychology, and finally aesthetics. During these studies he made several amateur films, won quite a few amateur competitions, and so became the terror of the amateur film movement. Finally he enrolled at the national film school in Łódź, and immediately upon graduation produced one film after another: four feature films and a whole series of half-hour TV films. Within four years this young scholar became—to the amazement of the entire film world of Warsaw

and Łódź—the leading figure in the Polish film industry.

Zanussi partly owed his rapid success to specific qualities of character: excellent organizational instinct, tactical skill, and precision. The pace at which he works is rarely encountered under Polish conditions. But his films convince us that he is also a great film talent.

As his thesis film at the film school Zanussi presented "*Śmierć Prowincjaka*" (*Death of the Provincial*). This half-hour film was not meant to be publicized, but it nevertheless received a lot of publicity. Up to this day I do not know whether this happened because of its unquestionable aesthetic and philosophical values, or because it was startlingly different from anything thus far produced at the film school or in the Polish cinema. It is certain, however, that the "singularity" of Zanussi's films as compared with